

the Source Book Talk

by Sherrah Behrens

Wintergirls by Laurie Halse Anderson

About:

Wintergirls, published in the spring of 2009, tells the story of Lia, who is on a quest to be the skinniest girl at school. Told from Lia's point of view, it carefully captures the mind of a girl consumed with anorexia. As she counts calories and then exercises those calories away, she watches her weight drop, even as she lies to herself and to her family that she is okay. It's an honest, heart-wrenching book that follows Lia's journey through her illness and into her first steps to recovery and health.

Anderson is the award winning writer of contemporary and historical young adult novels such as *Speak*, *Catalyst*, and *Chains*. In the acknowledgments to *Wintergirls*, she says, "I journeyed into the land of the *Wintergirls* because of the countless readers who wrote and talked to me about their struggles with eating disorders, cutting, and feeling lost. Their courage and honesty put me on the path to find Lia and helped me understand her brokenness. While Lia's story is not based on any living person, it was inspired by those readers, and I thank them." You can visit Anderson's website at www.writerlady.com, and access resources and a teacher's discussion guide for *Wintergirls* at <http://wintergirls.net>.

Length: 278 Pages

Recommended Reading Age: 13-14 years old and up (due to some mature content)

Characters:

Lia Overbrook: The main character.

Cassie Parrish: Lia's best friend until a fight separated them. Found dead at the beginning of the book, she haunts Lia throughout the story.

Dr. Marrigan: Lia's mother. Their relationship is tense. Any conversations usually end in yelling and fighting.

Professor Overbrook: Lia's father, a professor. He isn't around much and doesn't want to see what's happening to his daughter.

Jennifer: Lia's stepmother, tries to be helpful but is occasionally clueless.

Emma: Lia's nine year old half-sister. One of the few people Lia genuinely cares for.

Elijah: Works at the hotel where Cassie died. Becomes one of Lia's few friends.

Dr. Parker: Lia's therapist.

Story Summary:

Lia and Cassie were trying to become the skinniest girls in school. They were both doing very well with their goal when a car wreck put Lia in the hospital and clued her parents in on Lia's anorexia. Cassie's life quickly returned to normal, but Lia was sent to a treatment center.

During Lia's second hospitalization, Cassie's parents sent her to a doctor to get help. When Lia was released from the hospital, Cassie dumped Lia as a friend.

That was six months ago. Lia has left her mother to live with her father and step-mother and step-sister, and is trying to convince them that she's a normal girl, even as she reaches her first goal of 99 pounds and aims for Goal Number Two, 95 pounds, and Goal Number Three, 90 pounds.

On the morning the novel starts, Lia finds out that Cassie was found dead in a hotel room the night before. All weekend, Cassie had tried to call Lia, had in fact called her 33 times, but Lia never answered. And now, Cassie seems to be haunting her, showing up in Lia's room at night and taunting her. That's when Lia starts cutting again, even though she promised her father she wouldn't.

In the midst of the pain of dealing with Cassie's death and her possible part in it, Lia begins spinning out of control, slowly at first, but then more and more quickly. She sees Cassie everywhere, and she's losing more and more weight, and cutting more frequently and deeply. Her relationships with her mother, father, step-mother, and step-sister are crumbling, and she might have found a friend in Elijah, the boy who works at the hotel where Cassie's body was found, but he's mad at her for lying to him.

When her mother asks her to move back in so she can better monitor Lia's eating and activities, and when her father tells her they want to have her re-evaluated and possibly readmitted to the treatment center, Lia completely loses control. She feels completely alone, and Cassie's ghost has become more insistent and taunting, begging Lia to join her in death.

When Lia can't take anymore, she runs away, and in the same hotel where Cassie died, Lia must finally face her ghosts and decide whether to live or die. She ultimately chooses life, and begins the slow road to healing.

Things to Discuss:

Leader's Note: These questions are meant to be open-ended as a way to guide discussion and to provide a context for conversation. There are Scripture references that can be used to help guide the conversation.

It has been said that a person's perception is their reality. If a person thinks something is true, then in that person's mind, that something is real. Lia thinks she's fat, ugly, stupid, etc. and no matter what other people tell her, in her mind, she's right. Besides her weight, what other things do you think she is wrong about? For example, do you think her parents are as blind and uncaring as she thinks? In what ways do your perceptions define your reality? Do you think you might be wrong about any of your perceptions?

Cassie and Lia were friends for a long time and helped each other through some difficult points in their lives. In what ways was their friendship good for each other, and in what ways was it bad? What is friendship? (*John 15:12-17, 1 John 3:16-18*)

What does Lia mean when she talks about being a "real girl"? Do you ever feel like Lia, that you're not real anymore? What makes a person real?

Lia talks often about being "empty" and being "strong". She thinks that being empty, being thin, not eating, etc. makes her strong. Do you agree with her? Are those the things that make her strong, or is she strong in other ways? If so, in what ways do you think she is strong?

In the end, where does Lia find the strength to choose to live? Where do you find strength to get through the difficult times in your life? (*Romans, 8:18-25, 2 Corinthians 4:16-17, James 1:2-4, 12*)

Lia talks about "all of the badness" boiling under her skin and the ghosts inside her, and she cuts to let it all out. She hears voices telling her she's stupid, ugly, fat, baby, loser. etc. When have you felt like there was "badness" inside of you, or felt stupid, ugly, loser, etc.? Where do you think those thoughts come from? What do you do to get rid of them? (*Romans 3:23, Romans 5:6-11, Romans 8:37-39*)

Elijah says that he is "a wanderer in search of truth." What truth do you think he's looking for? Does he find it? Where do you go to find truth? (*John 8:32, John 14:6*)

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